

THE BESTOWAL OF THE TITLE OF 'DESPOT' IN BYZANTIUM: FROM COURTLY PROCEDURE TO DIPLOMATIC TOOL

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When Alexius I (1081-1118) usurped the Byzantine throne and settled his family at the pinnacle of imperial power, he began a substantial reform of court honours, establishing new ones and belittling the value of the older; some he completely abolished. The imperial clan became the pivot of this new system, in which the most exalted titles and offices were given to the *basileus's* relatives: the closest was the bond of kinship with the sovereign, the highest was the rank to which one might aspire. The title of despot was not conceived by Alexius I himself, but by his grandson Manuel I (1143-1180) in order to bestow it to the prince Bela of Hungary – who had just been engaged with his daughter Maria – and make him heir apparent. Although the despotate was probably the Byzantine version of the Hungarian title *urum*, which Bela already held, and was devised as an exceptional measure to avoid succession issues while Manuel I was still childless, it fitted perfectly Alexius I's canons and remained in use until the last days of the Empire.

The new title did not confer any specific office to the holder nor gave him a share of the imperial power, but placed him on the top of the court hierarchy, just behind the emperor and before the *sebastokrator*, which had held the second place since Alexius I enthronement. Until the second half of the XIIIth century the despotate was conferred to grooms of imperial princesses and made them heir to the throne unless a *porphyrogenitos* had been generated by the *basileus's* consort. From the years of Michael VIII (1259-1282) onwards the bestowal was extended to the sons of the emperor who were not first-born, but eventually lost its significance as a mean to secure the imperial succession. As for every other *axia*, the bestowal was performed at court and gave the holder a pension and some privileges such wearing a specific crown and purple garments, which distinguished him among all the other titled courtiers.

Courtly procedures for the creation of new despots were maintained until 1453, but the bestowal of the title took a new meaning from John III's reign (1222-1254). Beside its ordinary function, the conferral of the despotate became a diplomatic tool which the *basileis* used to re-integrate into the imperial sphere of influence those dynasts who ruled on principalities whose lands were formerly part of the Empire. Albeit these rulers, namely the lords of Epirus and the Trebizondian emperors, were mostly 'ethnic Rhomans', the increasing military and political weakness of the Palaeologan *basileia* prevented Constantinopolitan sovereigns from reaffirming their direct authority over them. Accepting the title, grantees formally recognized the emperors' hierarchical superiority. But, this had no practical influence on their behaviour as they continued to rule their principalities independently. In fact, though imperial power gradually shrunk in the XIVth and XVth centuries, the *basileus* continued to be recognised as the sole *fons honorum* by those princes who were members of the so-called 'Byzantine commonwealth', producing an evolution similar to that one even the Western emperors were facing in the same years.